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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study examining differences between rural counselors and principals. The study used the Counselor Role Inventory (CRI) to look at 105 Western schools which had a single counselor-principal pair. Sixteen survey questions were consolidated into four role functions: prevention, remediation, commitment, and sub-professional duties. Principals were asked to respond twice to each question, once as a consideration of the school counselor's "ideal role," and again as they considered typical practice in their schools. Counselors responded three times, the third response seeking the counselor's perception of how the principal viewed the counselor's role. Data were analyzed to identify patterns and magnitude of congruence between the two groups. Congruent patterns were evidenced in only 11 of 35 possible congruences. The data indicates, however, that the differences causing the divergent patterns were very small, suggesting substantial agreement between counselors and principals concerning the counselor's role. Both groups saw a similar, relatively small gap between the ideal set of activities and what was typically being done. Counselors viewed their principals as favoring less prevention, remediation, and commitment functions, and more sub-professional duties than was actually noted by principals. The paper suggests that counselors and principals should recognize areas of agreement concerning the school counselor's role and act constructively on that agreement. It calls for clear communication and support for the development of efficient, effective, and professional definitions of the counselor's role. (TES)

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A Study of Role Congruence Between School Counselors and School Principals

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A Study of Role Congruence Between School Counselors and School Principals

What counselors do day to day could be based on their perception of what their principal wants from the counselor's role. Difficulties between counselors and principals and/or gaps between what ought to be and what is may be partly due to counselors operating on what they think their principal wants them to do. In this study of 105 rural counselors and principals despite congruence in many areas this perception did not fit with the principal's view of the counselors' role or their report of typical practice in their schools.

School principals and school counselors can share a shaky partnership or substantial agreement. Due to their diverse training it is almost natural for some lack of communication or even antagonism to develop over differing orientations to students' welfare. Principals tend to view the school as an organizational whole, while counselors are more student centered. Research into principals' conceptions of the counselors' role has uncovered reactions ranging from substantial disagreement with counselors to the observation that principals may have a more accurate view of the counselors' role than do counselors themselves. Particularly in rural areas administrators have indicated a highly positive perception of school counselors (Sutton, 1988)

Principals are a primary determinant of the school counselor's role and no relationship is possibly more vital to the success of the rural guidance program. Sutton and Southworth (1990) found 90% of rural Maine counselors to be supervised by a principal or other administrator. Counselors tend to "read" what they think principals want and if communication is incomplete or is unclear, counselors can respond based on these impressions which may be equally incorrect.

In light of the importance of the counselor-principal relationship in rural areas this study was undertaken to determine how much consistency or fit (congruence) existed between the role perceptions of counselors and principals. The crux of the design was matching counselors and principals as an actual working dyad.

Method

Participants

The Counselor Role Inventory (CRI) was sent to 214 schools in three primarily rural western states having a single counselor-principal pair. Matched pairs resulted in 105 cases representing 49% of the original sample.

Measure

The CRI was largely based on the role statement of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA Governing Board, 1981). Counselors and principals responded to 16 questions which were consolidated into 4 role functions. These were prevention, remediation, commitment, and sub-professional duties.

Prevention was defined as assisting students in improving personal relationships and engaging in personal planning and decision making. Typical prevention activities are classroom group guidance, teacher inservice, and parent education.

The identification, diagnosis, and remediation of individual student difficulties made up the remediation function. Activities include small group and individual counseling, consultation with school staff and parents concerning individual student difficulties, and special education referrals and coordination.

Commitment was the generalized practices binding the counselor in professional relationships with students, teachers, parents, and administrators. These functions require the counselor to be available confidentially to students, to develop a close working relationship with the administrator, to create liaisons with community agencies and to participate in professional organizations.

Sub-professional duties were defined as those of a semi-clerical or quasi-professional nature that included routine documentation, mechanics of student scheduling, discipline and attendance taking, and substitute teaching. Traditionally performance of these types of duties have divided counselors and principals.

Principals were asked to respond twice to each question. The first to each item as part of the ideal role of the school counselor and the second to what they considered typical practice

in their schools. Counselors responded three times. The additional response area being their perception of how their building principal viewed the counselor's role.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed for each pair by matching separate pattern and magnitude congruence scores. Pattern scores ($\underline{C}_1 = \Sigma (\underline{s}_1 - \underline{s}_2)/4\underline{k}$ where $\underline{s}$ represents the CRI question and $\underline{k}$ represents the number of questions contained in that variable) referred to direction and revealed a tendency for the questions in a role function area to be answered in a consistent way. For example, for ideal scores to be rated higher on a 5 point scale than the typical scores. The hypothesis that the mean of pattern congruence scores was 0 (congruent) was tested utilizing $\underline{t}$-tests.

Magnitude scores ($\underline{C}_2 = [\ 1 - \Sigma(\underline{s}_1 - \underline{s}_2)/16\underline{k}\ ]^{1/2}$) focused on strength of response and concerned the absolute differences which made up the patterns. Magnitude scores provided a measure between 0 and 1 which indicated whether responses differed on average by a small amount such as a principal responding with a 5 and a counselor with a 4 or whether a larger gap in perceptions existed. Magnitude congruence scores were described by the appropriate descriptive measures for a non-normal distribution.

Results

Several patterns, notably those between principal reports and counselor perceptions, revealed lack of consistency between counselors and principals. Incongruent patterns were evident for

24 of 35 possible congruences and congruent patterns evidenced for 11 of the 35. However a very high magnitude of congruence existed over all scores (median scores ranged from .90 to.99) indicating that the differences causing the divergent patterns were very small. This suggested substantial agreement between counselors and principals concerning the counselor's role.

This agreement centered around consensus concerning the ideal role of the counselor and the gap between this ideal and the typical day to day duties of most counselors. Both counselors and principals had extremely similar views of the ideal role of the counselor. They strongly favored the activities included in the prevention, remediation, and commitment functions.

Similar views were expressed in terms of the differences between this ideal role and what was typical of the guidance program in their schools. Both groups saw a similar gap between the ideal set of activities and what was typically being done.

Counselors had congruent scores between what they considered ideal and typical practice concerning sub-professional duties. The principal's ideal pattern favored only slightly more sub-professional duties as opposed to what they felt was being done typically. These findings did not tend to support the recurrent counselor perception of the principal as strongly promoting paper work and other clerical duties over professional counseling duties. This was evidenced by the comment of a principal who stated that he did not expect a counselor to be a paper pusher;

the counselor should be working directly with students, staff, and parents.

However this high level of agreement appeared not to be fully recognized by counselors. The counselor's perceptions of their principal's role view provided an interesting contrast. All scores were highly congruent between this perception of the principal's view and the counselor's report of what they typically did day to day. However, this perception was not congruent with what principals reported as their ideal view or saw as typical practice. Counselors viewed their principals as favoring less of prevention, remediation, and commitment functions, and slightly more of sub-professional duties than was noted by their principals.

Discussion

The uniqueness of this study was looking at the principal and counselor as those two individuals working in the same school. Small rural schools were utilized and as noted by Sutton (1988) the principals and counselors could be assumed to be reasonably familiar with each other's working style, attitudes and philosophy, and to be interacting with each other on a very frequent basis. The results tend to support the notion of the importance of the principal as a counselor role determinant and that there is considerable agreement as to what that role should be.

However, more real communication may be needed in these interactions to more fully articulate that agreement. Counselors

could take a more proactive stance in explaining their professional role to principals. Trained supervisors of guidance personnel are rare in rural systems (Sutton, 1988) and counselors may need to develop more contact with their professional organizations to receive consultation. The development of written comprehensive guidance programs which require a team approach in development and an ongoing assessment process (Gysbers & Henderson, 1988) could also be a step in this direction.

The recurrent theme of too much clerical work for the counselor did not emerge as a major area of contention in this study. However in examining the results carefully and considering both counselor and principal comments, these duties were still somewhat problematic. A number of comments on the part of both counselors and principals attested to administrative duties and short-term substitute teaching as consuming too much of the counselor's time.

The congruence between counselors and principals on sub-professional duties does seem to imply agreement that these duties are part of the counselor's role. Both counselors and principals may need to examine their acceptance of duties for the counselor that do not require a masters degree level of training and expertise. Principals can support this effort by looking for more innovative and cost effective methods of accomplishing necessary but non-professional tasks without using counselors.

The challenge for counselors and principals is to recognize the magnitude of their agreement concerning the role of the school counselor and act constructively on that agreement. Ambiguity concerning the counselors' role has plagued the profession since its beginnings. Counselors and principals seem to be approaching a positive and professional agreement as to what this role should be. However, counselors may not be realizing their principal's support and operating based on perception rather than fact. Principals can help by providing clear communication and giving support to the development of efficient, effective, and professional boundaries for the counselor's role.

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